



MDC Resource Science

Missourian's and their Community Trees: Results from a MDC Survey

Science Notes



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By Tom Treiman, Nick Kuhn and Martha McCrary

Information Need

MDC's Community Forestry Program advises, coordinates, and facilitates the efforts that affect Missouri's community-owned trees. Assistance provided by MDC is targeted at local governments, arborists, non-profit organizations, and planning councils. To better understand citizen attitudes towards certain community forestry issues, such as hazard trees, topping, and urban sprawl, a self-administered survey questionnaire was mailed to over 16,000 randomly selected recipients in 44 selected Missouri communities, with a response rate of about 30%. Our goal was to determine the issues citizens in these communities felt to be most pressing, the support for passage of two hypothetical ballot issues, and the knowledge level citizens have about the tree program in their community.

Methods

A survey was administered in 2012 including asking respondents how they would vote on two hypothetical ballot questions: would they be willing to pay a tax (of varying level) to fund tree care and maintenance, and would they support establishing a new law to protect trees during development. Based on pre-tests, the survey was printed in 10 different versions, each with a different tax level (\$X) in the hypothetical ballot issue. This method, referred to in economic literature as the contingent valuation method, allows the calculation of the population's mean willingness-to-pay for public tree care and maintenance.

Results

- When asked "How would you vote to establish a tree fund costing each homeowner \$X?" over 53% of respondents said they would vote for the fund (across all monetary amounts), 23% against, and 23% undecided.
- The top reasons listed for respondents' decision on the hypothetical ballot issue were cost (72%), the wording of the referendum (65%), the condition of community trees (62%), and other competing community needs (54%).
- Missourian's willingness-to-pay for a tree fund in their community varied from a low of \$4.47 per household in smaller communities (population less than 5,000) to over \$60 in St. Louis and its suburbs (Figure 1).
- When deciding whether to vote for more taxes to pay for tree care, about 80% say trees help with property values is an important factor while only 11% say it would not be important.
- Trees are part of a community's infrastructure. Eighty-three percent agree or strongly agree that community trees are part of a community's assets like streets, utilities, and parks.

- There is strong support for tree protection during development and construction, with 84.6% that think protecting trees from development is important and 65% thinking too many trees are lost during development, and 80% think a community should protect trees from construction. Over 53% responded that it is very important or important to have a tree law which defines the communities' responsibilities in these areas.
- In questions about topped trees, 56% of people said topped trees are not healthy, over 90% said topped trees are not attractive but just 16% said they see topped trees frequently.
- About 72% responded it is either very or somewhat important for cities to manage trees to minimum standards.
- Almost 85% think it is important to prune trees and 90% think it is important to manage trees for safety.

Using the information

MDC's urban foresters and policy makers will be able to use these findings to design more effective outreach, education, and grant programs that help improve a Missouri community's understanding of urban forest resources and how to conserve this valuable asset. Each community and its residents are different, so MDC may need to highlight different information with different audiences.

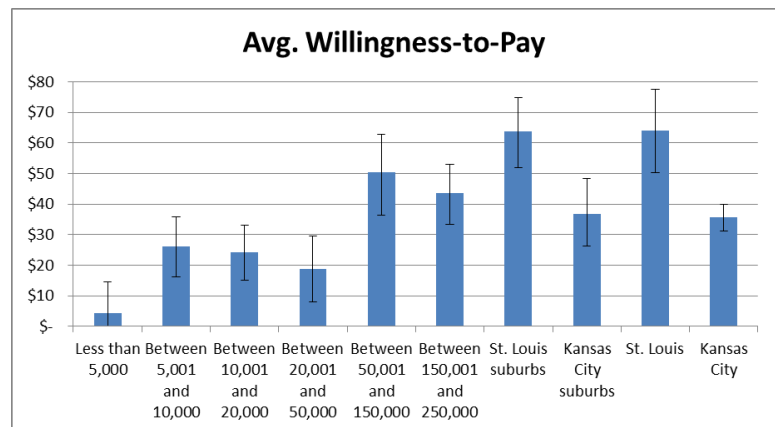


Figure 1. Mean willingness-to-pay for public tree care and maintenance ("How would you vote to establish a tree fund costing each homeowner \$X?"), from the 2012 survey.

For more information, contact:

*For more information, contact:
Missouri Department of Conservation
Resource Science Division
2901 West Truman Blvd
Jefferson City, MO 65109
573-751-4115
research@mdc.mo.gov*

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